



ARTIFACTS REPATRIATION DEBATE: BRITISH RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD INDIA'S HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

The British government has been at the forefront of global discussions on the return of cultural artifacts collected during colonization. India, Egypt, Greece, and Ethiopia are a few examples of the number of countries that are now demanding the return of their cultural heritage, which was taken away during the colonial era. Many historically relevant artifacts seem to inhabit a land far away from their origin, notably the *Koh-i-Noor* diamond, the *Sword of Emperor Aurangzeb*, the *Lord Harihara Idol* and the *Sultangunj Buddha*. The debate on returning these artifacts has raised important questions about the role of museums, the ethics of acquisition, security, and the need for political responsibility. The study will focus on collecting data through surveys from the citizens of both parties for a fair conclusion as well as a thorough analysis of historical perspectives relevant to the agenda. By analyzing the potential impact on diplomatic relations, cultural preservation, and the recognition of past injustices, this research aims to provide insights into the political responsibility of the British government concerning the repatriation of these artifacts.

KEYWORDS: Repatriation of Artifacts, Global Discussion, Political Responsibility, Security, Historical Perspective

INTRODUCTION

India stands out among the countries that experienced colonial rule as a vibrant and diverse country with a rich cultural heritage and centuries of artistic and intellectual accomplishments that have shaped it. Against this backdrop, the question of whether the British government should initiate the repatriation of Indian artifacts collected during colonization has garnered widespread attention and sparked passionate debates. The issue of repatriation, particularly concerning cultural artifacts acquired during the era of colonization, has gained significant traction in recent years. As societies grapple with the legacy of colonialism, discussions surrounding the return of cultural treasures to their countries of origin have become increasingly prominent.

The objective of this research is to delve into the historical context of colonial-era acquisitions and examine the legal frameworks, such as the British Museum Act of 1963, that shape the UK's approach to repatriation.

By conducting an in-depth analysis of the barriers and avenues that enable or hinder the return of artifacts, this study seeks to understand the complexities faced by both the UK and requesting nations when dealing with repatriation claims. Additionally, the research will investigate official statements, diplomatic responses, and public perceptions surrounding the issue, considering their impact on the decision-making processes of museums and governments.

Through a comprehensive examination of historical precedents and contemporary cases, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing global dialogue on cultural restitution. By shedding light on the multifaceted factors influencing repatriation efforts, this study aspires to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in promoting cultural understanding, justice, and cooperation between nations in the context of cultural repatriation.

Amidst the considerable number of artefacts housed within the British Museum and the increasing demands from nations for the

return of their cultural treasures, an essential question emerges: How does the UK manage these repatriation requests, and how does this dynamic influence its international relations? At the core of the UK's strategy lies the British Museum Act of 1963, a legal framework that empowers the country to deflect appeals for artifact repatriation. This research delves into the role of this legislation in preserving the UK's "historical pride". By conducting a survey, we aim to comprehend global perspectives on this matter, thereby assessing its implications for the historical narratives of both Britain and India.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper analyzes the British Museum Act of 1963 and its implications for the repatriation of cultural artifacts acquired during colonization. The study further aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the political, social, and cultural contexts surrounding the issue of repatriation. A hybrid data collection method was used to obtain the data for analysis and was qualitative in nature, as the entire discussion around and concept of repatriation are extremely subjective in nature.

To achieve this, a survey was conducted to gather data from citizens of both parties using a purposive sampling method where the participants of the survey had to be at least 15 years of age with some knowledge about global affairs and should have the legal citizenship of the regular countries, which was then analyzed in depth. A thorough review of pertinent literature and historical precedents supplemented the survey's findings. In the first survey, a batch of 52 citizens of India were asked the following questions:

1. How old are you?
2. As an Indian citizen, are you aware that many priceless Indian artifacts sit in the British Museum and not in their own country?
3. Do you think that the British government should initiate the repatriation, i.e., the return of these artifacts back to India?
4. Do you believe that the return of cultural artifacts to India would have a positive impact on the country's

cultural and historical narrative? Please explain your response.

5. How important is it for the Indian government to engage in diplomatic efforts to secure the return of cultural artifacts from British institutions?
6. Lastly, how would you feel if the cultural artifacts from India were repatriated and displayed in Indian museums or heritage sites?

In the second survey, a batch of 50 citizens of the United Kingdom were asked the following questions

1. How old are you?
2. Are you aware that several cultural artifacts from countries like India, Egypt, Greece, and Ethiopia are currently housed in British museums and institutions?
3. What is your opinion on the repatriation of these cultural artifacts to their countries of origin? Should the UK government consider initiating the return of these artifacts?
4. Do you believe that the repatriation of cultural artifacts would have any impact on the UK's historical narrative or identity? Please explain your response.
5. How important do you think it is for the UK government to engage in diplomatic efforts when handling repatriation requests from other countries?
6. How would you feel about seeing these artifacts no longer displayed in British museums but instead in their countries of origin, such as India, Egypt, Greece, or Ethiopia?

The paper examines the potential impact of repatriation on diplomatic relations and cultural preservation. It also discusses the recognition of past injustices and how repatriation efforts can contribute to addressing these issues. Furthermore, the study explores the multifaceted factors that influence repatriation efforts, including legal, ethical, and cultural considerations.

In addition to analyzing the British Museum Act of 1963, this paper also examines contemporary cases of repatriation efforts. By considering both historical and contemporary contexts, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding the issue of repatriation. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the ongoing global dialogue on cultural restitution and to promote greater awareness of the social and political responsibilities of governments in addressing past injustices

RESULTS

According to the first survey, where Indian citizens were asked several questions, 90.4% of them were in favor of the repatriation of the artifacts and strongly believed that it was a matter of political responsibility that the country receive its artifacts back from the British Museum.

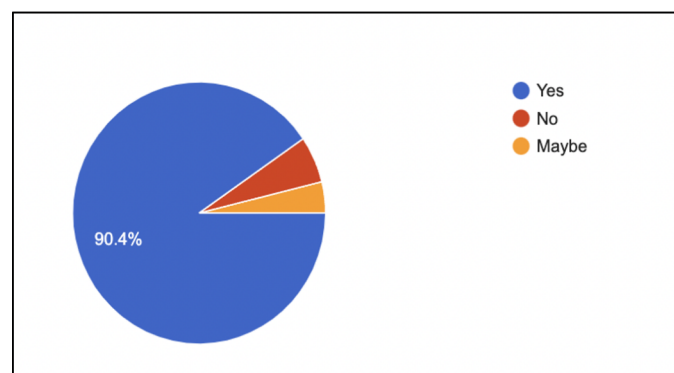


Fig. 1: Survey Results among Indian Citizens

The survey generated a varied number of responses from the citizens, ranging from how it is the country's historical pride to how the citizens should be "grateful" that a country like the United Kingdom displays Indian artifacts in their museum. 76% of the sample size argued that these artifacts belonged to them and that having these artifacts in the British Museum would definitely mislead younger generations about these countries' historical narratives.

Yes the artefacts will impact the generation talking about the ancient culture
Yes , these artifacts are an important part of India's history and culture . The return of these artifacts would help promote a greater sense of cultural pride and identity among the people of india .
Yes it would cause those artifacts are famous and if it comes to india more people would come to see them from multiple parts of our world and indias economy would automatically go up with the help of tourism.
It enriches the cultural heritage of india. The youth of this generation would understand India's past better. They would be able to physically see all of these things Indian people have created.
The country's culture remains prominent, I think having our artefacts in another country should be taken positively as they deem our culture is worthy enough to be displayed in another country. There are numerous artefacts available in India as well for our population to view appreciate our cultural heritage.

Fig. 1.2: Survey Results among Indian Citizens

From the results of the second survey, where 50 British citizens were asked about the repatriation of objects originating from other countries and whether they believe that their government should initiate repatriation as a matter of political responsibility, around 71.4% said that they believe it is 'moderately important' for the government to initiate the process, whereas 14.3% said it was extremely important, and lastly 14.3% said that the government should be focusing on other matters instead.

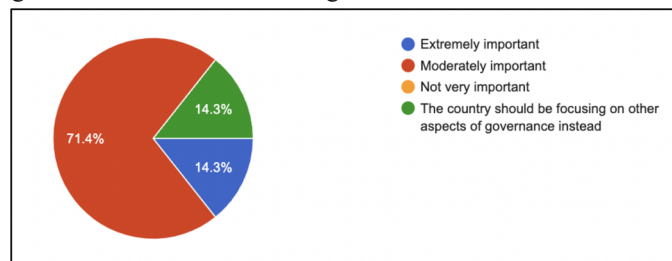


Fig. 1.3: Survey Results among British Citizens

When asked why they believe in their stance on this issue, 71.4% said that it has been 80 years and that it is time the government starts the process, while 28% argued that those artefacts are the United Kingdom's pride and that the artefacts' origin countries are not powerful enough to get them back.

No.Repatriation is the right thing to do. They have a unique connection with the place where they were produced and are an essential part of the cultural history of that area.
This is not really relevant to their history it is a much more integral part of the native countries histories
Although I don't believe that repatriating the artefacts would have any impact on the UK's historical narrative, I think it will significantly improve the UK's future narrative, since they would be praised for returning cultural artefacts to their rightful countries.
Those artefacts are pride of UK. These things will show the future generations how strong and long History UK had in the past .
Spoils UK's identity

Fig. 1.4: Survey Results among British Citizens

DISCUSSION

Two surveys, one involving Indian citizens and the other involving British citizens, were conducted to determine their views on the repatriation of cultural artefacts. The results of these surveys revealed stark contrasts between the two groups' perspectives on the issue.

The survey of Indian citizens found that 90.4% of respondents were in favor of repatriation, viewing it as a matter of political

responsibility for the country to receive its artefacts back from the British Museum. The survey generated a range of responses from citizens, including arguments that the artefacts were the country's historical pride and that having them in the British Museum would mislead younger generations about the country's historical narratives. These findings suggest that repatriation is an essential aspect of preserving India's cultural identity and heritage.

The survey of British citizens found that while 71.4% of respondents believed that it was moderately important for the government to initiate the process of repatriation, 14.3% believed it was extremely important, and 14.3% said that the government should focus on other matters instead. Those who supported repatriation argued that it had been 80 years since the artefacts had been taken, and it was time for the government to start the process. However, 28% of the respondents argued that the artefacts were part of the UK's cultural pride, and the countries of origin were not powerful enough to reclaim them. These findings suggest that the issue of repatriation is a divisive one in the UK, with differing views on the significance of the artefacts.

The differences in perspectives between Indian and British citizens highlight the complexity of the issue of repatriation. It is clear that the artefacts hold an important place in the cultural and historical narratives of the countries of origin, and their return would undoubtedly have a positive impact on the country's cultural and historical narrative. Some answers were deemed controversial, especially the ones where the survey asked for the opinions of the Indian citizens on repatriation; some chose to voice their notion that Indians should be proud and happy that a "country like the UK" finds our artefacts worthy enough to be displayed in their museums. Interestingly, this highlights the deep-rooted impact of colonization, even over seven decades later, on the citizens of India. The everlasting impression that the UK should be put on a pedestal truly puts the reality of the impact of colonization in the spotlight.

However, there are divergent viewpoints on the relevance of these artefacts, with some contending that they are essential to the cultural heritage of the UK. This highlights the probable absence of national self-awareness in the UK. The topic of repatriating cultural artefacts raises more general questions about power dynamics, sovereignty, and international relations, in addition to the differences in attitudes that the polls indicated.

The British Museum Act of 1963

The British Museum Act of 1963 is a foundational piece of legislation that defines the role and responsibilities of the British Museum in London. Its provisions are critical in shaping the museum's approach to the repatriation of cultural artefacts [3].

Provisions and Implications

Limitation 1: The Act's restrictions on deaccessioning serve as a significant barrier to repatriation efforts. Section 3 of the Act outlines the specific circumstances under which objects can be removed from the museum's collections. This includes transfers to other British institutions, restoration purposes, or if an object is considered a duplicate. Notably, the Act does not include repatriation to their countries of origin as a valid reason for deaccession.

This limitation makes it difficult for the British Museum to respond to restitution claims from other nations, even if there is a strong moral or ethical argument for the return of certain artefacts. The Act prioritizes the preservation and display of

artefacts within the museum's collections over the consideration of repatriation, potentially hindering efforts to address historical injustices related to colonial-era acquisitions.

Limitation 2: Section 5 of the Act addresses the issue of repatriation by mandating that the Trustees of the British Museum must consider requests for the return of cultural objects. However, the Act does not impose any legal obligation to repatriate objects based on these requests.

While the Act acknowledges the possibility of repatriation, it does not legally bind the museum to return objects. This provision allows the British Museum to review and assess repatriation requests, but it ultimately gives the Trustees the discretion to determine whether to repatriate or not. As a result, the Act allows the British Museum to retain significant control over the repatriation process, ensuring that the final decision aligns with its own preservation and display priorities.

Limitation 3: Section 27

"(1) Where, in pursuance of any provision of this Act, any article forming part of the collections of the Museum is disposed of, the disposal shall be made with a view to the article being retained in the national interest, provided that in any case in which there has been a claim to the article by any person before its disposal, whether under the preceding provisions of this Act or otherwise, the article shall not be disposed of until the claim has been determined or withdrawn."

(3) In this section, "the national interest" means the interest of students or scholars in the United Kingdom or of the public in the United Kingdom, whether or not it is also the interest of students or scholars or of the public in other countries."

Here, the term "national interest" is defined as the interest of students or scholars in the United Kingdom or the interest of the public in the United Kingdom. The section clarifies that this interest may or may not align with the interests of students, scholars, or the public in other countries.

This provision [12] reinforces the museum's primary responsibility to preserve and make artefacts available for educational and scholarly purposes. By prioritizing these interests, the Act can be interpreted as protecting the British Museum's collections from repatriation claims that could potentially hinder scholarly research and public access to these objects.

These limitations highlight the challenges of repatriation efforts in the context of the British Museum and its collections. Any decision to initiate repatriation would need to carefully balance the interests and concerns of all parties involved, taking into account the potential impact on international relations, cultural preservation, and the recognition of past injustices. While the Act provides some guidance on repatriation, it ultimately gives the British Museum significant discretion and control over the repatriation process. This makes it essential for the British government to find ways to address the legacy of colonialism in a way that is fair and just for all parties involved.

Furthermore, the controversy surrounding the Act highlights broader ethical and political questions about cultural heritage and ownership. Critics argue that the retention of cultural artefacts by Western museums perpetuates a power imbalance between former colonizers and colonized countries and that repatriation is a necessary step towards decolonization and

cultural justice. Proponents of repatriation argue that it is a way to rectify past wrongs and promote cultural diplomacy.

Cultural artifact repatriation has significant philosophical, political, and practical ramifications. Its potential precedent-setting nature is one of the main worries. For example, if the British government consents to return a priceless object, it might serve as a model for other countries making similar demands. For instance, the repatriation of the *Elgin Marbles* to Greece can lead to requests from other nations, such as Egypt for the *Rosetta Stone* or Ethiopia for the *Maqdala Jewels*. This potential cascade of repatriation demands raises both practical and moral issues.

In practical terms, it calls into question the significance of culture and the effect that tourism has on organizations like the British Museum. If many objects are returned, the museum's reputation as a comprehensive global repository of cultural heritage may suffer. This may have an impact on the attraction's popularity with visitors, who frequently go to museums like the British Museum to view a comprehensive collection of global history in one location. Additionally, it emphasizes the political and moral obligations of nations to confront their colonial legacies and make amends for previous injustices. The current discussion highlights how difficult it is to come up with workable solutions that strike a balance between these factors and promote international collaboration and cultural understanding.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Historically, cultural restitution has proved to be a thorny and emotive subject that can strain diplomatic relations between nations. The long-standing dispute over the Elgin Marbles [11], originating from the Parthenon temple in Greece and currently housed in the British Museum, stands as a poignant example of the tension cultural repatriation can evoke. Greece's persistent calls for the return of these ancient sculptures have been met with resistance from the UK, causing diplomatic friction and impassioned debates about the rightful ownership of cultural heritage. Similarly, Egypt's pursuit of the repatriation of the *Nefertiti Bust* from Germany's Neues Museum has sparked tensions between the two nations, with each asserting their claim to this iconic artifact. These instances demonstrate the complexity of cultural restitution and the potential impact it can have on diplomatic relations when nations grapple with issues of historical ownership and national identity.

The issue of the repatriation of cultural artefacts has been a highly debated topic, with potential political consequences for both the UK and India. For India, the repatriation of cultural artefacts is a matter of national pride and a symbol of the country's cultural resurgence. The artefacts that were taken during the colonial period are viewed as a reminder of the British Empire's exploitation of the country's resources and cultural heritage. The *Koh-i-Noor Diamond* is one such artifact that has been a source of tension between India and the UK, with India repeatedly calling for its return. The diamond, which was taken from India during the colonial period and has been in the possession of the British monarchy since 1851 [13], is viewed by many in India as a national treasure and a symbol of the country's rich cultural heritage.

However, the UK has refused to return the diamond, citing various legal and historical reasons. The issue of repatriation has also led to internal political tensions within India, particularly between different regions and communities vying for control over the artefacts. For example, the return of the *Koh-i-Noor Diamond* could potentially lead to tensions between different

regions of India, as it has been claimed by several states. Similarly, the return of other artefacts could lead to debates about their ownership and control. Moreover, the repatriation of cultural artefacts could be seen as a challenge to the legitimacy of the Indian state. The artefacts in question were taken during the colonial period, and their return could potentially open up debates about the nature of Indian sovereignty and the legacy of colonialism. This could potentially lead to political tensions within India and between India and the UK.

On the other hand, the UK has argued that repatriation could undermine its historical narrative and national identity. The British Museum, for example, has been a central institution in shaping the UK's cultural and historical identity, and repatriation could be seen as a loss of this heritage. The museum is home to several cultural artefacts from former colonies, including India, Egypt, Greece, and Ethiopia, that were taken during the colonial period. Repatriation would mean that these artefacts would no longer be displayed in British museums but instead in their countries of origin. This could be seen as a loss of cultural heritage for the UK as well as a challenge to its historical narrative.

The return of the *Benin Bronzes*, looted by British soldiers in the 19th century, has been a major issue in the UK-Nigeria relationship. The British Museum alone holds around 900 of these artifacts. Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments has called for their return, saying that the artefacts were taken "under conditions of violence and duress". However, the British Museum has argued that it would be illegal to return the bronzes, as they were acquired by the museum before the passage of the British Museum Act of 1963, which prohibits the deaccession of artefacts from the museum's collection. This has led to tensions between the two countries, with Nigeria accusing the UK of "colonialism in practice" [8].

As the debate over repatriation intensifies, it has significant implications for the diplomatic landscape between the UK and India. The issue transcends the mere return of artefacts and delves into broader questions of historical injustices and political responsibility. The responses of both governments and their respective populations to these demands can shape bilateral relations and influence international perceptions of the UK's role in addressing its colonial past. As the call for cultural restitution gains momentum, finding common ground that respects historical heritage, preserves cultural treasures, and acknowledges past wrongs remains an intricate and challenging task for both nations.

CONCLUSION

The issue of the repatriation of colonial artefacts from India is a complex one with far-reaching political and cultural implications. The study was aimed at analyzing the potential impact on diplomatic relations, cultural preservation, and the recognition of past injustices. The findings of the survey showed that a majority of Indian citizens believe that the British government should initiate the repatriation of cultural artefacts collected during colonization. The return of cultural artefacts is a matter of national pride and a symbol of the country's cultural resurgence. The artefacts that were taken during the colonial period are viewed as a reminder of the British Empire's exploitation of the country's resources and cultural heritage.

The study also highlighted the barriers and avenues that enable or hinder the return of artefacts. The British Museum Act of 1963 has been used to stave off the calls for the artefacts. This law aids the UK in retaining its "historical pride", but it has also led to

strained diplomatic ties and economic consequences. It is important that the UK government finds ways to address the legacy of colonialism in a way that is fair and just for all parties involved.

Certain restrictions that are evident during the survey's participant selection procedure call for a more thorough investigation. It is crucial to understand the inherent biases in this selection process, even though the study sought to capture the opinions of Indian and British individuals, both of whom have a stake in the cultural repatriation issue.

Firstly, limiting the study to just India and the UK could unintentionally limit its coverage of those two nations' complex histories of colonialism and repatriation conflicts. It would be advantageous to incorporate the perspectives of populations from nations that were not subject to colonial authority, such as Bhutan, Japan, or Liberia, in order to acquire more thorough and objective knowledge.

These countries provide distinctive perspectives free from the historical complications of colonization, which may help to clarify the matter from a new and less prejudiced viewpoint.

The survey's methodology, particularly the use of purposive sampling, also raises questions about representativeness. Participants who are less knowledgeable about international issues may be unintentionally excluded if this requirement is met. Furthermore, the cultural, ethnic, and regional diversity found in India and the UK was not taken into consideration in the surveys, which has a substantial impact on respondents' views on cultural repatriation.

Conducting a thorough analysis requires taking into account a wider variety of viewpoints from other nations, backgrounds, and degrees of issue knowledge. The study's results would be enhanced by a more thorough examination of global viewpoints, which would also deepen our grasp of the complex dynamics influencing cultural repatriation on a worldwide scale

Overall, the issue of the repatriation of colonial artefacts from India has significant implications for international relations, cultural heritage, and the recognition of past injustices. Any decision to initiate repatriation would need to carefully balance the interests and concerns of all parties involved, taking into account the potential impact on international relations and the broader cultural landscape.

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